

Ink:

A Visual and Movement Exploration of Metaphor through Chinese and  
American Cultural Perspectives of the Colors Black and White

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## ABSTRACT

Metaphor as a way of thinking permeates daily life. It affects how people understand and experience everything. It also plays an important role in artistic creation. The idea of creating highly personal but commonly understood metaphors was central to the research and creation of *Ink*. I created this work to find out how I—as a Chinese artist with unique personal experiences, educational experiences, and cultural perspectives—can explore metaphors that would resonate with predominantly Western audiences. This research specifically addressed the metaphorical meanings of the colors black and white and drew from my visual artistry to compose dances, stage setting, and costume design.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Metaphors are powerful tools to help people  
understand the complex world around them.*

*They are bridges between the known and unknown,  
and they are ways that we can learn about  
something that is unfamiliar by referring  
to some known experiences” (Roemer, 2009).*

*— Dr. Carol Roemer*

The study of metaphor has a long history in Western countries; it has been traced back to Aristotle, who “formulated the first substantial discussion of metaphor in the Western tradition” (Guldin, 2016, p. 4). Traditional metaphor theory only saw metaphor as a linguistic phenomenon or a kind of rhetoric. However, with the development of linguistics—especially cognitive linguistics—more scholars are discovering that metaphor is not only a rhetorical means but also a kind of universal human mode of thinking. In 1980, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published *Metaphors We Live By*, which argued that metaphors are pervasive in everyday life—not just in language, but also in thought and action. They claimed that metaphor is a conceptual system and way of thinking that is present in all aspects of language, culture, and society (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

A common definition of metaphor is that of a comparison that shows how two things that are not alike in most ways are similar in another important way. In their work, Lakoff and Johnson explain how a metaphor is simply an understanding and experiencing

of one kind of thing in terms of another. The authors call this concept a "conduit metaphor." According to this concept, a speaker can put ideas or objects into words or containers and send them along a channel or conduit to a listener who, then, takes that idea or object out of the container and makes meaning of it. In other words, communication is something into which ideas go. The container is separate from the ideas themselves (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

After a series of preliminary investigations into using metaphor, exploring Lakoff and Johnson's work and reviewing my personal daily habits and creative experiences, I realized metaphor plays an important role in my everyday life and dance making. In the process of creating *Ink*, I connected my personal experience, educational background, and social context through metaphor. I also researched other artists who successfully manipulate metaphor in order to study the use of metaphor in artistic creation.

### METAPHOR MAPPING

The work of Lakoff and Johnson identifies the metaphoric process as a mapping of one domain onto another domain. Lakoff and Johnson also state that the essence of metaphorical meaning is the mapping relationship between source domain and target domain. The source domain is the conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions, and the target domain is the conceptual domain that we try to understand (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). If both domains of the metaphor are abstract or unfamiliar, one cannot interpret the metaphorical meaning accurately.

In my previous work, *Empty, Empty! Empty?*, I used a series of Chinese metaphors to present different visual images of emptiness. Only a part of my intention

translated to the audience. For example, in the second part of this work, I intended to interpret the Chinese metaphor, “Cannot see the forest for the trees” by using a work light to directly illuminate the dancer to make her eyes blank (which is another meaning of emptiness). My personal understanding of emptiness as target domain was abstract to my predominantly Western audience. I did not make the source domain clear and understandable and, therefore, this mapping was not successful in expressing my purpose (Liang, 2015).

Certainly, I am not arguing that all art needs to be correctly interpreted by its audience; but, as the creator of the work, it is necessary for me consider my audience. It is my responsibility as the choreographer to understand what is being communicated and avoid making a work that no one can understand. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is a cognitive means and way of thinking which represents personal experience and perspectives. The personal nature of metaphor cannot be ignored, although there can be commonality across people's perception. In everyday life, people use metaphor to understand the connections between things. These metaphors are based on the similar properties between things being described and the image used within the description. Metaphor is not casually or carelessly created (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This, to me, is what makes metaphor-making similar to dance-making. Thus, the idea of creating highly personal but commonly understood metaphors motivated my research and creation of *Ink*. I created this work to find out how I, as a Chinese artist with unique personal experiences, educational experiences, and cultural perspectives, can explore metaphors that would resonate with predominantly Western audiences.

## CHINESE METAPHOR

As a Chinese artist studying in Arizona, I bring my life experiences as a Chinese citizen to the United States. China is a country that greatly respects its ancient civilization; the strict studying of classical literature and poetry are deeply embedded in education, from early elementary to higher education. As it is well known in China, Chinese literature is heavily inspired by images of nature—mountains, rivers, flora, and various depictions of animals. This is often poetically combined with folkloric objects to express personal feelings. As a result of the years spent learning this ancient knowledge, our general public establishes a basic understanding of the usage of metaphor within Chinese culture. Chinese artists, therefore, often approach their creative processes through the use of metaphors. For example, Zhao Xiaogang's work, *Ode to the Lotus Flower*, uses metaphor to portray the female form as a lotus and has been praised and studied by many Chinese dancers (Xiaogang, 2006). In order for me to create a personal-yet-commonly-understood metaphor for my predominantly Western audience, though, I must not only have extensive experience in learning and using metaphor but also be acquainted with the differences between Eastern and Western cultures.

My intent was to investigate the differences between Eastern and Western culture and creatively explore my own cultural perspective to uncover the source of my creative interests as a dance maker. To narrow and anchor my metaphoric movement-based research, I decided to focus on the Chinese metaphor, "White sands mix with soil, and along with it goes black."



The metaphor in its full context is, “If pigweed grows up in the midst of hemp, it will stand up straight without propping. If white sand is mixed with mud, it too will turn black” (Watson, 1963, pp. 15-23). This comes from *Encouraging Learning* by Xunzi (also written as Hsün-Tzu), who was one of the three great early architects of Confucian philosophy (Elstein, 2017). Denotatively, the metaphor describes the result of growing pigweed amongst hemp and mixing white sand with soil. Connotatively, it aims to emphasize the importance of being present in one’s environment. For example, a healthy, thriving learning environment will help a student improve and a thriving student brings life to a learning environment. Xunzi focused on humanity's part in creating the roles and practices of an orderly society; his “white sands” metaphor reveals the close relationship between the individual and his or her sociocultural environment. Regardless of whether a person's nature is good or evil, one can only obey or succumb to their environment.

#### MORE THAN JUST BLACK AND WHITE

The original concept for *Ink* involved discovering the differences between Eastern and Western cultural understandings of the colors black and white, investigating my personal perspectives of these two colors, and putting my interpretation into the metaphor container of production, costume, and stage design. The research started with an investigation into the cultural significance of the colors black and white in both Eastern and Western culture.

After some research, I began to question whether this concept was too narrow. It was easy to be limited to the generally positive or generally negative connotations and associations of these two colors. For instance, black is often associated with the negative,

frightful, and unknown, while white is often associated with that which is positive, righteous, and peaceful. On the other hand, I found that this research could be too expansive since the colors black and white are also employed to metaphorically project the nature of human beings. In stories of good versus evil, black/darkness is always symbolic of the villain—like Darth Vader in *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977). Likewise, the Chinese metaphor "white sands mix with soil, and along with it goes black" uses black soil to represent the dangerous situations that turn people evil.

In the end, neither of these understandings of black and white became driving forces behind *Ink*. However, they served to root my personal experience to some degree. I started to question how I could discover what I sincerely believe and how I could use these colors in a way that prevented people from associating them with the most obvious and readily available connotation of good/evil. What voice did I need to employ to challenge their perception and encourage their questioning of sociocultural factors? Unintentionally and unexpectedly, the space, transition, and contrast between black and white attracted my attention.

To create the frame of this project, I decided to investigate the reason I was attracted to the space between the colors. I determined it was tied to my interest in exploring notions of personal growth; the transition from one color to another represented the transition from child to adult and individual to community. These transitional concepts deeply influenced the creation of *Ink* and were made most explicit in the following words and statements.

初/Newborn,

*You was born lovely, your nature is so kind, touched me without touching me*

染/Experience

*The hurt, the pain, the mourning      C'est la vie kido*

噬/Self-identify

*Your suffering reconstructs you to strength, and drives me to tear*

墨/Ink, tomorrow

*You are learning how to be strong, how to love others by loving yourself*

I put these words and statements on the back of postcards and placed them in the theater lobby during intermission for *Ink*. From these cards, the audience could read the title and context for the work. The text, in addition to giving the audience information, acted as a concrete and tangible product of *Ink* that I will carry with me in the future. It can be divided into two parts: the heading and the subheadings. The four headings constitute the timeline of this work. Based on growth in general, they provide the audience with substantial information—the beginning, suffering, noticing, and learning. The four subheadings act as a personal response to the headings, the beginning of life, early family life, living away from home, and self-cognition in the new environment, in doing so, introduce the emotions I felt at each stage. The exploration of a growth stage and transition/relationship between the two colors is represented in the second—“染/Experience”—and third —“噬/Self-identify”—sections. To me, these parts separately represent my life in China and the United States, respectively. The “染/Experience”

section, in particular, addressed the sensitivity with which these family members treated their relationships to each other became the original motivation that underlays.

I experienced growing up in the 1990s under the one-child policy in China and, therefore, belonged to a very lonely generation of children. This policy produced a particular family relationship and impacted the independence of my generation. The most common type of family unit in the 1990s included parents who worked full-time to support their child and grandparents who took care of that child. Most of these grandparents did not receive higher education and, consequently, their knowledge of early-childhood education and skills of communication with children were insufficient. Kids in this growth environment had a tendency to hide the need for their parents' company and had to perform sensibility and independence to minimize the pressure they put on their parents. However, the parents would often try to explain how much they care to make up for their absence and lack of physical affection during the growth stage of the child.

In addition to acknowledging this sensibility to social relations within the family unit, *Ink* explores my Chinese generation's desire to be mature, independent, and self-reliant as we grew away from the family. This initial relationship and later desire exists in many places. However, they coexist to create an incidental and inevitable impact on my generation: difficulty in delivering the love, care, and attention that we need. These thoughts and behaviors motivated me to stage a release of my feelings about my childhood experience in the third section. This was the part that puzzled me most because I am currently experiencing this stage and, therefore, had difficulty in processing and

considering what, exactly, it is at this time. Overall, *Ink* served to help me process what it means to be the only child in my family, to experience growth, and to face my current situation of living in a different sociocultural environment.

### MIXING METAPHORS/THE REHEARSAL PROCESS

As I worked toward the November 18, 2016 premier date of *Ink*, I journaled on my ideas and experience. On April 29, I wrote

A few frames are hovering in my mind. I stand alone in a white space without boundaries. Suddenly, a hand pours the black sand from the top into space, while another hand slowly stirs me and the sand together..... Another frame dissolves after the hand moves out from the image, an ink droplet drops into a piece of clean water and slowly blooms. These two scenes keep showing in front of my eyes, I feel they are telling me something, but I do not know yet (Liang, 2016).

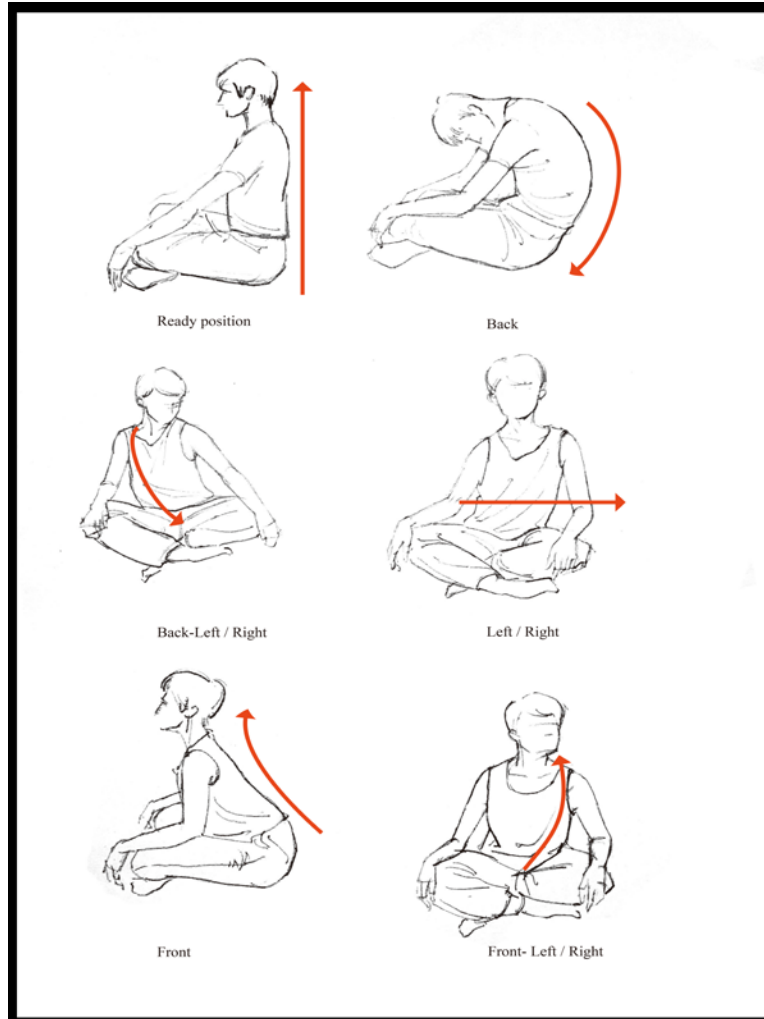
As a metaphor-generating artist, building a multisensory image that could underpin the concept and guide the creative process was crucial for me. I view the process of creating a dance piece as similar to writing. I start by developing a simple framework to envision the work as a whole, with each part having a reasonable place within this whole so that the content does not meander from the original concept. I wanted to create an innovative visual image for my predominantly Western audience to understand my more intertwined interpretation of the colors black and white. I did this by imagining the body as visual text to evoke the audience's physical and spiritual response to growth. These methods became a guide for people to read this abstract, multi-culture blended and personal project.

The six dancers in *Ink* were all excellently trained in a variety of moving styles with diverse understandings of dance. Of the dancers in the piece, only one was trained in traditional or contemporary Chinese dance forms. My movement style is deeply influenced by my Chinese dance training, and this challenged the dancers both physically and mentally. My movement required the dancers to physically embody the concept and stay consciously attuned to the intention of the work. To create a common movement vocabulary, we started with game play and introductory explorations of traditional Chinese dance concepts.

### **Creating Textures Through Game Play**

**Don't Let the Connection Fall.** The first game we used in the rehearsal process was "Don't Let the Connection Fall." In this game, we placed a napkin over a connection point between two dancers and improvised movement with the goal of keeping the napkin where it was placed. This was the first activity that physically introduced the concept of understanding metaphor through the body. It primarily functioned to get the dancers to be comfortable with each other and moving together in close proximity. Most importantly, this game served as a process through which we could explore our connections to each other and to internal energy. Because of my Chinese dance training, the physical and spiritual connection between dancers is especially important to me. Particularly, I value and seek to employ a unique kind of partner work that is not just body contact. In this kind of partner work—the kind I value and the kind that was facilitated by this game—the dancers are emotionally and mentally related to one another.

To emphasize the physical connection in this game and further rehearsal, I often referenced Chinese traditional dance training, which focuses heavily on moving internal energy to each part of the body and beyond—transferring to others' kinespheres. This internal energy is traditionally referred to as *qi* energy and known as the core concept of *Tai Chi*. The idea of *qi* is not just executed in *Tai Chi*; it also influenced movement connections in Chinese traditional dance training in order to develop suppleness and sustainability in motion. During rehearsals for *Ink*, we practiced the basic torso exercises from Chinese traditional dance in a seated position with the legs crossed. This helped the dancers find the connection between the head and tail and move *qi* along with the centerline of the body to eight directions along the range of motion in the torso—front, back, left/right, front-left/right, and back-left/right. The vital and most challenging part of this practice is the “inward state and a subsequent awareness of *qi* energy before the initiation of movement by the physical body” (Gerdes, 2010, p. 239). This practice ignited passion for this group. For my cast—made of dancers predominantly born and raised in the United States—this was an exciting opportunity to get to know a new style of movement and its cultural background.



*Figure 1.* The eight directions in Chinese traditional dance training; drawn by Zijing Zhao

**Pocket Billiards.** The spiritual connection and further application of *qi* was addressed in the next game we played: “Pocket Billiards.” Billiards, of course, involves using a pool cue to strike a cue ball in such a way that it causes an object—ball—to go into a pocket. The motion of one ball’s impact on another became the original inspiration for movement creation in the second section: “染/Experience.” This section represented



my early growth experiences in China. The concepts of my sensitive response to my parents and subdued familial relationships were manipulated as the chain reactions in a Billiards game. To create an improvisation-based game to explore this concept and image, I started by setting three rules on three dancers. The first rule was that the game starts and develops with three dancers hand-in-hand. Second, these dancers could only disconnect their hands for a maximum of three seconds during the whole process. Finally, the three dancers were required to read and respond to their partners' movements from the physical connection, rather than create their own movement motifs.

With this foundation, the dancers showed highly skilled awareness of their own and others' bodies and presence, but the rules of the game limited their motions. They dropped into repetitive movement patterns. As a metaphor-generating artist, I offered my dancers a multisensory image in an attempt to solve this situation. I instructed, "repeating the process and route of the impact of two balls and particularly reversing on the moment of two balls almost hit each other," while making fists with my hands to imitate the motion of the balls. With this metaphorical instruction and a hint of the word "disconnection," my cast realized my connotative suggestion was to play with the disconnection and not be afraid of it. I can describe and summarize my reflection on the final performance of the section that arose from this exploration in the short sentence, "I leave for a new beginning."

**Dance to Extreme.** Among all of the games that we employed in rehearsal, "Dance to Extreme" was the one to which I returned the most. This activity was created by a simple improvisational score in which dancers were instructed to dance extremely

quickly or extremely slowly in a group. “Dance to Extreme” was the simplest and longest game, as it generally took twenty to thirty minutes to run once. The reason we continuously approached this activity in two-hour rehearsal was so that the dancers could become attuned to the intention of the work at each meeting. This game was particularly potent because it allowed the dancers to integrate the core ideas and physical and spiritual connection of other games into this one. As I look back at my prior research and the eventual performance of *Ink*, I can see that the image of ink dropping and blooming in water was fully embodied by the dancers—largely as a result of “Dance to Extreme.”



*Figure 2.* Ink drops and blooms in the water

### **Exploring Tactile Metaphors**

In addition to gameplay, three dance video projects facilitated tactile exploration during the creative process. I specifically designed three material experiences for the dancers in the form of video creation toward the end of the choreographic process. I selected flour, mesh fabric, and water as the materials to guide my dancers through a deeper and tactile understanding of the growing experience. Specifically, the idea of the second video project was to have two dancers walk into a field that was covered with flour. They touched and sensed the texture of the material and gradually placed the flour on their own and their partner's bodies. The decisions of when, where, and how to place the flour was made from the dancers' personal reflection on either the concept of this project or their individual lived memories. The physical experience of adding something tactile functioned as more than just a process to get the dancers to understand the concept of tracing the changes we have made during our growth stages; it helped them understand the verbal metaphors I was addressing in studio rehearsal. I specifically remember toward the end of the experience two dancers looked at their own and their partner's body and turned their head around to see different body parts. They blew away the flour within their hands and played with water like kids taking shower. They shared the discovery of cutaneous bodily sensations, which provided them with a new sensorial entry point into quality of the dance movement, and thus, a new layer of performative quality was formed.



*Figure 3. The material experience and exploration in Ink*

### **Visualizing Movement Metaphors**

There is a tradition in Chinese literature which employs metaphor as more than just a method for conveying idiomatic statements, but as an understanding of life essence. Before we started rehearsals, my biggest concern was verbal communication in regards to conveying the connotative meaning of each metaphor accurately. I was particularly concerned about the personal experience and perspective represented by each metaphor; the personal nature of metaphor cannot be ignored. To overcome our cultural differences and help the dancers understand *Ink*'s core idea better, I employed various types of media in rehearsals to communicate each metaphor. In the first section of the work, the dancers embodied ever-changing beats using their spinal range of motion to represent the gestation period. The various directions and energy levels in which their torsos moved symbolized each gestation stage. Based on my prior experience with my cast in rehearsals, I suspected they might have a hard time finding the connection between this concept and its movements.

To bridge the literal and metaphoric for my dancers, I tried three approaches. First, I used visual images to evoke a physical response. I brought fetus pictures and explained in detail the characteristics of each gestation stage. As I showed my dancers these images, I invited them to consider the functions of the spine and, in particular, a movement in which the head quickly dips down and slowly rolls up to bring the spine to vertical along each vertebra. In my second approach, I asked the dancers to associate certain sensations, emotions, and images with movement. For example, I instructed them to imagine the changing beats of two interweaved heartbeats from the mother and fetus and to choose one beat to explore consistent quality of motion. In doing this, the spine moved through a similar function as the symbols in the first growth stage of the concept for *Ink*. Finally, I employed storytelling as a baby to metaphorically share my observation of their movements and offer them feedback from which they could adjust. Because of these three approaches to bridging the literal and metaphoric, the dancers and I were able to develop movement vocabularies with strongly associated meanings, emotions, and images with the concept for *Ink* spiritually and physically present in the dancers. I found that the ideal process of clarifying an idea was not linguistically transmitting my intention to the dancers, but understandably accepting their responses to my prompts.



*Figure 4. The spinal movement development in Ink*

### **Production Design**

On October 13<sup>th</sup>—a little more than a month before the premier of *Ink*—I brought a giant piece of white fabric to the studio. The motion of pulling the fabric up and down created an impressive image reminiscent of rolling waves in the ocean. The moment I hung the fabric, though, it lost its expression; it only served as a big piece of fabric background with no visual aesthetic or metaphorical meaning. The day after this rehearsal, I knew, without a doubt, that I needed to use seven panels fabric—each two yards wide and six yards long, painted by airbrush ink from one side to another—to express the concepts for *Ink*.

It took an entire week to paint the seven pieces of fabric. I polished the painting with water, which means I sprayed the fabric with water until it was wet before brushing the airbrush ink on it. To create the image of pouring the ink from the top, I had to add

layers of paint to one side multiple times and then use the brush to push the ink along with water to the rest of the fabric. I could only dye one panel a day, so my emotional state each day heavily influenced the way I painted. As a result, the seven pieces of fabric looked very different when they were finished. However, because I had a clear image in mind to support my creation, the seven panels worked cohesively to create an illusory image of Chinese ink painting.

During the painting process, I was struck by how distinct each painting was; it was just like each of us existing in this world and carrying with us a different story. “Am I going to be evaluated differently for having a less smooth transition between the colors black and white?” I questioned as if I were the fabric and my growing experience were the painting. I answered myself almost immediately. No one should be judged by the uniqueness; the colors black and white should not reflect any positive or negative connotation in this project; and the growing process, in my perspective, is like drawing or writing on a blank paper—what matters is not the color of the paper nor the painting, but the drawing itself. If the white sand metaphor facilitated my neutral interpretation of the colors, the painting process expanded my ability to interpret my life and others.



*Figure 5.* The sketching of stage background design in *Ink*

### **Creating Within Constraints**

Image-based creation through production elements permeates my work. Inspired by the image of a hand pouring black sand into an empty space from the top, the original idea for creating a stage setting for *Ink* included sand pouring down over a plastic sheet to dirty the dancers' clothes. This stage design idea was eventually replaced by the idea of installing seven panels of painted fabric which would be activated by the dancers' motion.

While this stage design was inspired by the image of an ink droplet dropping and blooming in water, it was also motivated by a trip I took to find production materials at





*Figure 6. The stage background design and setting in Ink*

the fabric store. Practicality always brings people unanticipated situations and unexpected solutions. The original idea, for the most part, had to be abandoned due to the performance space's policies which forbade sand. Additionally, working with a big group of people in a short period of time further reinforced the impracticality of the original idea. Scheduling the rehearsal, effectively producing new material, and timely solving the problems created by this stage design during practice was not easy. I did not have enough time to find the best solutions to maintain my original idea, as pouring sand creates timing issues to be resolved and dirtying costumes creates logistical issues which I attempted to, but could not, resolve. In the end, I was genuinely satisfied with the ultimate stage design for *Ink* and how it interacted with the dancers. However, as a choreographer who produces work primarily through exploring visual images, I remain

curious about what the actual effect of the original design would be. This entire experience reinforced, for me, the importance of introducing production and stage design elements into the creative process as early as possible.

### LOOKING BEYOND THE PAINTING OF *INK*

Through the artistic creation of *Ink*, I developed a neutral interpretation of the colors black and white. *Ink* germinated within my present perception of life, formed from my previous growing and educational experience, and was influenced by the sociocultural context of both China and the United States. Certainly, making the decision to avoid interpretations involving associations of right and wrong with the colors black and white challenged common sociocultural perceptions. For artists like me, though, the most advantageous means by which to deliver a point of view that might differ from the norm is to create art.

To create a highly personal but commonly understood project for my predominantly Western audience, I started with the abstract but connotative Chinese metaphor, “white sands mix with soil, and along with it goes black.” Throughout a year of research and nine months of rehearsal, I learned to execute visual images practically, collaborate with non-Eastern dancers, publicize works, and establish a systematic methodology of creating metaphor that addresses personal interpretation and serves as a means of communication that surpasses cultural boundaries. Most potently, I developed an understanding of image-based creation through production elements and an ability to skillfully display the connection between visual art and dance.

While I have made these significant discoveries and developments regarding an embodied life-art process that guided me to a greater understanding of myself physically and mentally, I have also experienced significant growth in my understanding of how to harness and highlight individuality in a creative project. In the past, I have not considered the cultural backgrounds or understandings of my individual dancers and how they might differ. However, my focus on the cultural perspectives of metaphor in *Ink* offered me new ways of seeing individuality within my compositional process. For example, it was important to me that the color of the top of the costume was dyed to match each dancer's skin color. The experience of attempting and failing to find tops that matched the range of skin tones present amongst my dancers was a revelation to me. I was previously unaware that some colors were not available, and I had to dye the tops myself. Therefore, the idea of becoming a global citizen emerged as a result of the process of creating *Ink*. *Ink* was not just a piece that summarized my personal presence and experience; it ignited my passion to apply the skill of creating metaphor to abstract or inexpressible emotions, thoughts, and concepts. Gender, age, and race are rarely mentioned in Chinese education, and there is no intellectual or artistic way to guide people to discuss it. These sensitive issues are often avoided or treated irrationally by people in China. For three years studying in the United States, my creative focus was not on power or equality in regard to these political topics. Instead, the learning of individuality planted a seed in my mind. *Ink* is the first step to learn the method of making a voice. In potential future works, I wish to address metaphor in artwork to give people a more vivid understanding of the things that are inexpressible.

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